NEW HEADWAITER Ben McKean, a founder of Savored, a Web site that helps restaurants fill tables.

CARLO MANTICA, who helps run Le Cirque, counted the filled tables at the restaurant at a recent lunch. “If they’re empty, I’ll get upset,” he said.
Mr. Mantica’s problem is one that all restaurants puzzle over. Costs (the staff, the food, the flowers, electricity) are pretty much the same whether there is a single diner or a full house.

While airlines and hotels have figured out how to vary prices to fill flights and rooms, restaurants’ methods have largely remained in the icebox age. Now, some restaurants are borrowing a tactic from other hospitality businesses and charging different prices for meals at different times.

The restaurants’ premise is that a dinner at 8 p.m. on Saturday should simply cost more than one at 5:30 on a Monday. “Restaurants are catching up,” said Sheryl E. Kimes, professor of operations management at Cornell’s school of hotel administration. They are betting that consumers, used to paying extra for holiday-weekend flights, V.I.P. seats at the theater or umbrellas on the street after the first raindrop hits, will also pay more for their Friday-night dinners out.

The tools of variable pricing range from a Groupon or Gilt City coupon to a notification from the mobile app Leloca, used by restaurants including Mas (La Grillade) and Centro Vinoteca to let restaurateurs send on-the-spot deals to Leloca subscribers in certain locations when, for example, that 9 p.m. birthday-party group doesn’t show up.

A Web site called Savored, which Le Cirque uses, offers discounted meals based on reservation time.

“The challenge that every single restaurant is faced with is the elasticity of demand from consumers,” said Ben McKean, Savored’s co-founder and C.E.O. “In an off-peak hour, you might get only a couple people who want to go to the restaurant, and in a peak hour you might get people out the door.” Restaurants are “leaving so much on the table,” he said.

Savored, used by more than 1,000 restaurants, asks diners to make reservations online. (It is working on integration into OpenTable, the reservations system used by about 44 percent of reservation-taking North American restaurants.) It offers discounts for the less popular times, usually 15 or 30 percent off a bill. It is applied to the check before it reaches the table, so there are no coupons.

Savored studies a restaurant’s traffic pattern, and those of comparable places, to suggest when to offer discounts: Saturday nights at the Capital Grille, a steakhouse in the Wall Street area, are slow because it attracts a workweek crowd, so all Saturday-night slots are offered at a discount. But at Fatty Crab in the West Village, the only discounted Saturday-night slot is at 11 p.m.

While Savored allows restaurants to charge extra for prime-time tables, few use that option. Most of those doing so have made it part of a special package, like a $375 meal at Eleven Madison Park that included a meet-and-greet with the chef, wine pairings, a cookbook — and a hard-to-snag 8 p.m. December Saturday reservation.

Professor Kimes of Cornell said that restaurants have been reluctant to vary prices out of a fear that consumers will find it unfair. However, her research suggests consumers are comfortable
with the idea. Professor Kimes and her assistants asked 334 hotel guests to rate the fairness of different kinds of restaurant pricing, like different prices for lunch versus dinner, or weekdays versus weekends, or one table location versus another. “People were O.K. with different prices by time of day and day of week, but what made that even more pronounced was the way you framed it,” she said. “If you said it’s 20 percent cheaper to come during the week than on the weekend, people thought that was more acceptable than if you said it’s 20 percent more expensive on the weekend.”

In Chicago, mk the Restaurant has used Savored for about a year, putting the Sunday-to-Thursday 5:30, 6, 8 and 8:30 slots at a discount (8 p.m. and later is off-peak for Chicago diners, says the office manager of mk, Megan Jeyifo). For maximum profits, it can block Savored from filling reservations during particularly busy times.

Ms. Jeyifo said that Savored diners tended to be younger than mk’s usual clientele and that many were repeat customers. She also said the subtlety of the approach worked well at mk, where a customer buying a $675 1990 Cos d’Estournel might not want to whip out a coupon.

“We’ve had business diners come in who are spending a lot of money, and they’ll call us before and say, ‘You’re sure you’re not going to mention Savored when we sit down?’ ” she said.

At Le Cirque, Mr. Mantica, the co-chief executive of LC International, which owns Le Cirque and other restaurants, has to seat at least 100 people for lunch and 150 for dinner to break even. He says Savored helps him do what Sirio Maccioni, Le Cirque’s founder, used to do on slow nights with an address book. “He’d know Mr. So-and-so hadn’t come in in a month, so he’d call him up and say, we have a new dish, come in tonight,” Mr. Mantica said. “There’s only so many Sirios you can hire.”

The Savored slots have helped him fill out the early and late part of every evening. (Indeed, Le Cirque no longer offers its cheaper pre-theater menu, as Savored reservations fill those slots.)

As waiters poured rum over a baked alaska and set it on fire, prompting envious glances from neighboring tables, Mr. Mantica mused about where technology was headed. He said he could foresee offering different discounts hour by hour. That made him wonder whether Savored and other technologies were, perhaps, just updating an old tradition. “What the maître d’ does, he keeps certain tables open because he knows the V.I.P. is going to show up,” he said. “In the tech world, we could keep some openings, and ask them to pay more. I don’t know how, but maybe it’s the virtual $20 bill in the hand.”

Just $20 will get you in on a packed night? He smiled. “I was trying to be modest.” Some prices, it seems, have been variable for a while.